Maryland Group Reaches Out to Israeli Businesses

Smith, Jamie . Smith, Jamie.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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"It came at just the right time," he said of the program. "They'll be holding our hands through the process." He toured the sleep lab at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore last week. Earlier, a Honeywell Technology Solutions official suggested ways that he and the others could get their feet in the door of a large company -- either for contracts or investment dollars. Maryland's secretary of economic development, Aris Melissaratos, also offered to help [Hadas] find a chief executive to run his U.S. operation.

"It's quite simple," Hadas said. "The office will open where the CEO lives." Guy Yachin, chief executive and founder of Chiasma, located near Tel Aviv, developed a method to deliver injected medicine orally instead. During his visit last week, he said he's looking to set up a U.S. satellite by the end of the year in Maryland, Massachusetts or somewhere in between, making him eager to hear more about life sciences here.

FULL TEXT

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Apr. 25--Before last week, Noam Gavriely figured Boston was the place for a foreign medical device company in need of a U.S. office.

Maryland on his mind? Hardly.

But the entrepreneur is seriously rethinking that assumption after spending Sunday through Thursday in Baltimore as part of a new program to help Israeli businesses break into the American market. He's impressed that the state is home to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health and many hospitals.

"That perspective was an eye-opener for me," said Gavriely, founder and chief medical officer of ETView, which developed an endotracheal tube with a tiny video camera for safer intubation.

That's exactly the reaction MarketReach America organizers hoped for.

The program aims to help Israeli companies enter the U.S. -- preferably, but not necessarily, in Maryland. It is run jointly by a non-profit economic development organization called the Maryland/ Israel Development Center and its Israeli consultant, the Trendlines Group.

Barry Bogage, executive director of the center, notes that participants get to know the area and local professionals -- key

needs for a foreign company to succeed in a new place.

"People do business with people they know," said Bogage, whose center is supported by The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, the state Department of Business and Economic Development and Israel's Ministry of Industry and Trade.

International relations efforts appear increasingly important in a market where even start-ups want to go global and, like it or not, American jobs are heading overseas.

Even before people were wringing their hands over outsourcing, states were aggressively wooing international trade and investment, often fighting among themselves for foreign car manufacturing plants and other operations, said Peter Morici, a business professor at the University of Maryland.

Like their counterparts elsewhere, Maryland governors have for decades courted economic development from beyond the country by traveling on trade missions. Comptroller William Donald Schaefer visited 25 countries while he was governor from 1987 to 1995.

The center was formed in 1992, an outgrowth of a pact between Schaefer and Israel's U.S. ambassador to promote economic development between the two jurisdictions.

Since then, the center has set up eight trade missions to Israel for state and business officials and helped make connections between companies. MarketReach represents a new direction for the group. It's a good deal more intensive than the traditional week-long, getting-to-know-you trip.

"If you want to close deals, you have to be with a company for a long while," Bogage said.

Leslie Schweitzer, senior trade advisor for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, can't think of another state involved in a similar program -- efforts elsewhere often begin and end with trade missions.

The five Israeli life sciences companies that make up the first MarketReach class were in town last week to learn about financing, marketing and closing deals in the U.S. market, to talk to consultants and to visit local medical sites.

They'll be back separately in the fall to pitch their products to American businesses, after help researching potential customers, developing strategies and fine-tuning presentations.

A group of telecommunications and information technology companies from Israel will start the same process this summer.

Much of the cost is covered by grants from the U.S.-Israel Science and Technology Foundation. But the first round of participants paid $4,500 to $8,300 upfront, not including travel expenses. They also agreed to turn over 2.5 percent of income for five years that they earn because of MarketReach, or up to $100,000.

"You know you've got serious companies if they pay to come into the program," said attorney Wil Sirota, co-chair of Piper Rudnick's venture capital and emerging companies practice group, one of the advisors who met with participants.

In the end, though, "this probably costs them less" than trying to jump into the U.S. without help, Sirota said.

"I think having a big brother partner in the U.S. is really critical," added Rebecca Seidman, an Annapolis business consultant

who also offered advice to participants.

Most of the companies are start-ups, but S.L.P. in Tel Aviv has been producing sleep-disorder sensors for about a dozen years and already does business in America. Noam Hadas, the chief executive and product inventor, said the program is a "blessing" because he wants to establish a U.S. office by January 2005 to support the launch of a new line of disposable sensors.

Hadas' background is engineering, not marketing, so he appreciates the insight.

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Yachin, whose business is negotiating agreements with two biotech companies, was particularly interested in learning about local industry. He's looking for more drug manufacturers interested in putting his technology to use.

"For a company like ours, one or two additional collaborators could make a big difference," he said.

MarketReach's other participants are a cell therapy company called MGVS and Andante Medical Devices, which developed a monitoring and biofeedback system for lower limb rehabilitation.

Israel is a "great market" for Maryland because both are heavily focused on biotech, homeland defense and information security, said Christopher C. Foster, deputy secretary of economic development. Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s first international trade mission -- last November -- took him to that country.

Foster said his department is impressed by the MarketReach companies and wants to help them find office space, venture capital and employees so they'll settle in state.

"Instead of outsourcing, you want 'insourcing,'" he said. "This is the first step in 'insourcing.'"

Credit: The Baltimore Sun

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